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ON PAGE 1A

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Spy stigma tags Soviets in the USA

'They're normal people'; FBI says 1 in 3 in embassies are spies

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USA TODAY

Soviet citizens in the USA live in fenced-in compounds, socialize with their own and send their children to embassy schools. But in rare instances — far from the diplomatic circles of New York and Washington, D.C. — East and West cross paths.

For Anatole and Lucy Sobolev, the brush with another world came two years ago when they met Cindy Sherbinow, a driver at a Milwaukee factory that distributes Soviet-made tractors.

Sherbinow ferried the couple around town, careful not to let the Sobolevs out of her sight. Soon, she was going to their home for Christmas and taking them on picnics.

"They were my friends," says Sherbinow, 26, an employee at Milwaukee's Belarus Machinery Inc. "People would question me — how can you work for them? They're Russians. But they're normal people just like anybody else."

They're not. Many Soviet citizens in the USA are marked by the Cold War legacy and now the Nicholas Daniloff affair. The FBI estimates that a third of those working in embassies and missions in New York, Washington and San Francisco are trained as spies.

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Wednesday's State Department announcement that 2[illegible] employees of the United Nations Soviet mission must leave the country by Oct. 1 only revived the specter of espionage. In the wake of the detention of *U.S. News & World Report* Moscow bureau chief Daniloff, it added another burden to the already-tense relationship between the superpowers.

Who are the Soviets in the USA?

They are embassy officials and journalists in Washington, D.C., consular officials and diplomats in New York, and factory workers dotted in tiny numbers in the Midwest. Commercial representatives, most in New York, make up only 60 of the estimated 980 Soviets in the USA.

Many live in hermetic compounds hidden from the hubbub of city life. Few can venture unattended through the streets of large cities.

Some come to the USA on exchange programs. This week, 25 Soviet judges and legal officials were in Chicago as part of an exchange with the American Bar Association. At the Argonne National Laboratory outside Chicago, 12 scientists were involved in another program.

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In October, a group of seminarians will travel to the Midwest. Soviets will be represented at a conference on Soviet film to be held today at the Kennan Institute in Washington, D.C. Sister-city programs, such as one Chicago is trying to arrange with Kiev, may bring others to the USA.

These informal "diplomacy exchanges" occur quietly, away from angry headlines, says Rick Cooper of the Chicago Center for USA-U.S.S.R. Relations.

But the word "spy" has always interfered.

In Washington, the imposing new $70 million, 12.5-acre Soviet Embassy towers above the city, 350 feet above sea level — will give the Soviets "an electronic view of the city," says American University intelligence expert Jeffrey T. Richelson.

The current Washington compound is home to Soviet citizens and their families who live under tight security, rarely giving outsiders a glimpse of their private world. Behind the walls lies a playground where children ride bikes and slip their quarters into Pepsi machines.

About 10 Soviet families live in Hamlet North, a cluster of three-story buildings in the Virginia suburbs. Although they generally keep to themselves, the adults sometimes attend local dances, their children use the community swimming pool and play on the lawns.

Some experts are convinced these Soviets are involved in some form of espionage. Roy Godson, a Georgetown University intelligence expert, says Soviet spy activity in the USA has increased steadily since 1960. He claims Moscow has a "massive presence" here. According to Godson, about 800 to 1,000 out of 2,600 Eastern bloc officials in the USA are known or suspected spies.

In New York, some 300 high-ranking Soviets rent private apartments. Though part of the metropolis, they rarely advertise their presence.

The remainder live in a 20-story apartment compound owned by the Soviet Union on six acres in the Riverdale section of the Bronx. Each morning, residents exit the fenced-in building through a remote-controlled gate and pile into buses bound for the 67th Street Soviet Mission or to the United Nations.

In 1982, the Long Island town of Glen Cove caused a stir when it tried to restrict Russians from using its beaches and tennis courts. But the "weekend retreat" — a 49-room mansion overlooking Long Island Sound — was not simply for rest.

Arkady Shevchenko, a high-ranking Soviet official in the United Nations who defected in 1978, claimed in 1985 that Soviet technicians used the attic of the retreat to tape telephone conversations all over the Northeast, with sophisticated electronic equipment.

Outside major cities, Soviets have a hard time finding a place to vacation: popular spots like Hawaii, Southern California, Cape Cod, Mass., and Key West, Fla., are off-limits.

They are barred from visiting 20 percent of the country, and sometimes the rules present a peculiar dilemma: Baxter State Park in central Maine is surrounded by restricted areas. The park itself is not off-limits, but the only way to get there is to fly by chartered plane. "Very few Soviets apply to go to Maine," a State department official said.

In Milwaukee, Elvis "Smokey" Harrison, plant manager for Belarus Machinery Inc., says there is a rotation of three Soviet workers at the plant every two to three years. Their rent at a nearby apartment complex maintained is paid for by the company, and they are given a driver to chauffeur them around town.

"They can't go outside the city limits without permission from the State Department," says Harrison. "If they want to go to the state fair or something we make special arrangements."

Clearly, the United Nations move has not helped the already precarious relationship between the two nations, each of which harbors the other's citizens uneasily.

The USA exported $2.8 billion worth of goods, mostly grain, to the Soviet Union, and some fear the USA's move will hurt business between the two countries.

Already, the Daniloff incident has caused some USA groups to cancel sessions with Soviet colleagues, though informal exchanges continue to take place quietly.

Some say the cultural exchanges assist Moscow, as the Soviets are believed to rely heavily on human intelligence gathering.

Whatever the method, their efforts have borne fruit. American University's Richelson says there's little doubt Soviet Embassy officials intercepted telephone communications of the Agriculture Department in the early 1970s to get "the best deal they could" for grain. The deal later came to be known as the "great grain robbery."

According to Richelson, the Soviets also monitor the Commerce, Treasury and Defense Departments.

In addition, the Soviets can now intercept telephone communications by locking into microwave transmissions and sorting through a flood of

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phone calls by eavesdropping on extensions used by different USA agencies.

Even the old Soviet Embassy still displays a giant, 19-by-15-foot high-frequency antenna on its roof aimed at the Pentagon and State Department. And experts say that the new compound will give Soviets much greater spying capabilities.

But for Cindy Sherbinow, memories of her Soviet friends have little to do with the high stakes of spying.

When the Sobolev family came to Milwaukee two years ago, Sherbinow was on call most of the week — taking them to the local Pick 'N' Save to shop for food, to doctors and dentists and to local parks for picnics.

The family came to enjoy country and Western and rock 'n' roll music, and invited her to their home on holidays and for her birthday.

When they left, Sherbinow drove them one last time to the airport.

"It was very hard for me," she says. "They gave me a goodbye present — a red rose preserved in a glass case. I just gave them a hug and a kiss.

"I doubt I'll ever see them again."

Contributing: Holly Spahn, Denise Kalette, John McGowan, Sam Meddis and William Dunn.